

Brother can you spare a bike?

Punta Gorda's public bike-share program has potential to stimulate business growth

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In the next week or two, sturdy, singlespeed bicycles the color of yellow traffic lights will begin to appear in front of businesses in downtown Punta Gorda. Like library books, they are free for the public to use and return, but only during daylight hours. The amenity is thanks to a partnership between local residents and business owners, with support from the city. It sets Punta Gorda apart from the rest of Southwest Florida, and ahead of most communities across the country, even cyclist havens like Boulder, Colo.

Like two handfuls of other American cities, Boulder plans to begin the kind of public bikeshare program that has shown success in Europe. That is, when an old-time mode of transportation becomes new and chic once again: utilized by a city, its residents and visitors, to clear up traffic congestion in an urban core, promote a healthy lifestyle and save gasoline for

longer trips. Boulder is set to launch its bike-share program in a few months, and many other communities, including Miami Beach, have discussed developing one. Meanwhile, Punta Gorda's program quietly came first — albeit on a smaller and more low-tech scale.

But before you become entranced with utopian visions of a free ride along Charlotte Harbour, the wind tousling your sun-streaked locks, consider how the city's Yellow Bike Loaner Program will work. There are 12 bicycles to start off with, at Laishley Park Municipal Marina and at Fishermen's Village, the open-air, retail/residential mall.



If you see one locked on a rack in front of a business, you go in and leave your credit card information

and driver's license, and sign a waiver that holds you responsible for damages to the bike or to yourself (if, for instance, you aren't wearing a helmet and pop wheelies off the steps of City Hall). That business aside, the bike is yours to use for a short trip or for the day. You take the lock and key with you, and lock up wherever you go. Just return the bike undamaged, either a half hour before the business closes or before sunset.



"We are trying to be very thorough," said Gene Pawlowski, chair of the Spokes and Trails Committee for TEAM Punta Gorda, the grassroots cooperative that developed the Yellow Bike Loaner Program. "We expect there may be thefts of them because they're on racks and they have a cable and padlock on them outside the business, so we want them to be easily identifiable."

Mr. Pawlowski brought the idea back to town about a year and a half ago after a summer sailboat race on Lake Michigan. His crew enjoyed the public bikes in Menominee, Mich., where the race ended. It reminded him of the marinas along Charlotte Harbour, where boaters come ashore with no transportation. The Punta Gorda Downtown Merchants' Association, led Jerry Presseller, also thought the bike share idea was a fit.

"It's another amenity for our winter friends and guests," Mr. Presseller said.

Team Punta Gorda worked out most of the details last year before the city adopted the plan at council meeting this month, agreeing to take ownership and place the bicycles under its insurance umbrella.

"That's how the organizations in this city work together," Mr. Pawlowski said.

As it turned out, his initial thought also fit neatly into multi-million dollar infrastructure plans well under way in Punta Gorda. The city and private groups are building a "ring around the city," 15 miles of multi-use trail that connects the downtown business and historic districts, all the way out to Jones Loop Road off Interstate 75.

"What the bicycle loaner program does," said city councilman Larry Freidman, "is to enhance this utility, this 'ring around the city,' in as much as it will give residents, tourists and boaters an opportunity, if they don't have their own transportation, to have this bicycle for their use during the day, and see downtown businesses and the lake and at the end of the day return the bicycle to where they found it.

"I suspect (the bike loaner program) will be a great thing. It's rather unique, at least for this part of Florida. Hopefully, it will act as a catalyst for the overall objects, to stimulate business and interest in the city and help us grow our commercial tax base."

A 'bike-friendly community'

Punta Gorda officials and citizens, including Mr. Friedman, TEAM Punta Gorda, and Mayor Harvey Goldberg, are also aggressively pursuing a Bicycle Friendly Community designation

by the League of American Cyclists. The Washington D.C.-based program has become the main measuring stick for how well cities across the United States accommodate cyclists.

The lowest level is bronze, held in Florida only by Tallahassee, St. Petersburg and Orlando. That's followed by silver, which Gainesville achieved, followed by gold, then platinum. Only three cities in the United States, including Boulder, Colo., currently hold the highest level. Mayor Harvey Goldberg, at his recent State of the City Address, sought to make Punta Gorda "the premier pedestrian/bicycle friendly community in the state of Florida."

His city received an honorable mention as a Bicycle Friendly Community last year, which is rare for a first-time applicant. Lee County didn't get a mention after it applied in 2008.

After the bike loaner program and the "ring around the city" are in place, along with educational programs and bicycling events, Mr. Mazur and others hope to earn at least bronze status from the league.

And after that, the sky is the limit. Frank Mazur, chair of the Community and Economic Development Committee of TEAM Punta Gorda, envisions his city leading the region toward a future in which Southwest Florida is a mecca for bicyclists. They would flock here to ride along the countryside, charmed by quaint historic sites and long-necked birds, titillated by temperate breezes, and guided by swaying palms to the doors of local businesses, hotels and bed and breakfast inns. One way he proposes is to build trails along defunct railways.

"We would like to work with both Collier and Lee County, and extend our bike paths all the way south through Collier, and all the way up through Arcadia," Mr. Mazur said. "I really believe it could be an economic boost to this area. I'm from Vermont and I know what biking can do to bring people in there during the summertime. I'd like to see an inter-county task force identify a strategic plan."

Local business owners have their own ideas about how the bikes may be used, including installing baskets on them, and handing out maps showing which businesses have the amenity. Susan Soles, owner of Tropical Reflections, a shop at Fishermen's Village, suggested having kiddie seats available to pull behind the bicycles. As for the color, "I love the color," she said. "Yellow kind of reminds me of (Lance) Armstrong."

Evolution of the public bike share

Public bike shares are rooted in idealistic visions that didn't work at first. Early American programs in the 1990s, when cities like Portland, Ore., and Austin, Texas, painted old beater bikes yellow and simply placed them on the street, with insignias asking people to leave them from whence they came. Most were stolen or vandalized.

Recent incarnations have taken that initial urban whimsy and shaped it with realism. Punta Gorda's bikes are new Sun Atlas cruisers, each with a placard that reads "Punta Gorda free bicycle loaner program," as well as the name of the business sponsoring it. They will have old-fashioned coaster brakes, as well as a license and registration number so the police department can keep track of them.

One of the first bike share programs began in mid-1960s Holland. It was started by an anarchist group, Provo. The solid white bicycles, placed around Amsterdam, were to be taken and used at will. The program was recorded in a documentary about life in Holland, "Sex, Drugs and Democracy." The founders of the 1994 yellow bike share in Portland quoted the film as their inspiration to get started. It's based on trust and doesn't hold users accountable. That's considered the first generation of bike-share programs, which ended as the bikes disappeared or were misused. The second generation — similar to what Punta Gorda has — asks the user to leave a deposit that he or she gets back upon returning the ride. The third generation is more high tech. Paris has Velib, one of the world's most successful third-generation bicycle-sharing programs. But reports show that even the Parisian ideal is having its struggles with vandalism and theft.

"With 80 percent of the initial 20,600 bicycles stolen or damaged, the program's organizers have had to hire several hundred people just to fix them,"

The New York Times reported in October. Even so, The Times reported, daily use of Velib averages between 50,000 and 150,000 trips.

Cities such as Washington, D.C., Barcelona and Montreal have similar programs: docking stations that take nominal payments for use of high-tech bikes that often have built-in electronic tracking devices. "That could be a possibility" for Punta Gorda, Mr. Pawlowski said. "That's very big in Europe right now. (But) we want to do it on a lowcost basis. That's the way we have to do it right now."

Boulder paid about \$1 million to get started with 250 or more bicycles at 10 docking stations throughout the city. By contrast, Punta Gorda's initial start-up fees for 12 bicycles at ran about \$7,000, an amount covered by donations and fees. Sponsoring businesses have their names emblazoned on the bicycles in front of their shops. They pay an initial fee of \$600 for the first year, followed by about \$60 in the following years, to maintain the bikes. Advertising opportunities are just one aspect of the new program that may be considered. For example, in Minnesota, Blue Cross/Blue Shield paid \$1 million to have its name on public bikes being ridden throughout Minneapolis.

TEAM Punta Gorda plans to have about 20 yellow Sun Atlas cruisers on the street by the end of the year, and 30 or 40 by next year — maybe more, depending on interest.

"As we get more and more bicycles out on the trails and streets of Punta Gorda you'll see, I think, a mindset shift and change," Mr. Pawlowski said.

For more information about upcoming bicycling events in Punta Gorda, visit www.teampuntagorda.org/indexppp.html. ;